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SUBJECT: NEA A/S WELCH DISCUSSION OF IRAQ AT FRENCH MFA,  
JUNE 12, 2008

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

1.. (SBU) NEA A/S Welch held extensive bilateral consultations on key NEA issues with French MFA counterparts in Paris on June 12. This cable focuses on Iraq; other topics reported septel (notal). Participants included:

USG  
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--NEA A/S David Welch  
--Deputy Legal Adviser Jonathan Schwartz  
--Embassy Paris Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt  
--Embassy Paris NEA Watcher (notetaker)  
--NEA Staff Assistant Mustafa Popal

GOF  
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--French MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon  
--French MFA NEA Adviser to the Foreign Minister, Christophe Bigot  
--French MFA IO Adviser to the Foreign Minister Alice Guitton  
--French MFA DAS-equivalent for Iran/Iraq/Arabian Peninsula Franck Gellet  
--French MFA IO desk officer for NEA Salina Grenet  
--French MFA Iraq desk Officer Olivier Masseret (notetaker)

12. (C) A/S Welch said he would not talk in detail about the situation on the ground but speak instead about the Iraqi government, stabilizing it in the face of the Iranian threat, and helping reintegrate Iraq in the Arab world. He referred to the progress we have made in creating different international fora related to Iraq -- the Friends, the Neighbors, the GCC 3, and ICI -- all of which allow for more convincing discussion of Iraq. The UAE FM visit is bound to be followed by others. Jordan, Bahrain, and the UAE will increase their interaction with Iraq. Kuwait's engagement may seem less prominent but is also less of a problem because it is much more connected in less visible ways to what is happening in Iraq. Saudi King Abdallah, Welch continued, will not quickly change his mind about Iraqi PM Maliki, but others in Saudi Arabia are prepared to think differently. Arab League SecGen Amr Musa is thinking about organizing a national reconciliation conference inside Iraq, which the USG thinks would be a good idea but the Iraqis are resistant because they consider it interference and patronizing. Welch expressed hope that we can change the overall perspective within the region and among Iraqis in the next few months. Arab engagement, he maintained, was most important given the Arab conception of Iraq as the historical bulwark against Persian hegemony.

13. (C) The Arabs have not yet come to grips with a Shi'a-dominated regime in Baghdad, in French MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Felix-Paganon's opinion. Things are moving but slowly. He further described relations among Iraqi Shi'a as increasingly more complicated than between Sunni and

Shi'a. The other Arab regimes have become too used to the idea, since the 1930s, of a Sunni-dominated Iraq. It will take time to change that sentiment and for the other Arabs to accept that their role and objective should be promoting dialogue and peace among the competing factions and not just reinforcing the Sunnis' position. PM Maliki, however, is principally seeking to weaken external Arab efforts toward Iraq. Felix-Paganon also asserted that, while a meaningful intra-Iraqi dialogue cannot occur without some involvement or support by Iraq's neighbors, most of them do not presently see Iraq as a fully independent country. Without calling for a U.S. pullout, he observed that the U.S. role in Iraq makes matters more complicated for Iraq's neighbors.

14. (C) Felix-Paganon affirmed that "what we can do, we will try to do." This included trying to work with Iraq's Shi'a and Iraq's neighbors. All of France's Iraqi interlocutors, however, raise the same concerns about the framework agreement and SOFA being negotiated with the U.S. Everyone describes the drafts under discussion as "unsellable," given U.S.-proposed terms. When Welch asked what specific points the Iraqis were raising in this regard, Felix-Paganon cited detention of prisoners and immunities (with objections focused more on private security companies than the U.S. military). The Iraqis claim to want an end to the UN mandate for the presence of foreign troops but are now raising the possible need to extend the mandate beyond its planned expiry at the end of 2008. Felix-Paganon stated that the Iraqis doubt that their parliament would be able to ratify any accord by the USG's current deadline. Welch noted that the USG sees things differently than the Iraqis in some crucial respects, e.g., the possibility of a gradual transition from

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a Chapter VII mandate to something directly negotiated as well as Iraq's insistence on obtaining parliamentary ratification for any agreements (the USG regards any text as an executive agreement not subject to Congressional approval). The USG hopes to avoid another UNSC mandate. The Bush administration also hopes to exit office with a better regional situation and foundation for U.S. involvement with Iraq for the next president. Arab public opinion may be opposed to the U.S. troop presence, but no Arab regime wants an early pullout. Welch repeated our encouragement that France play an important role pressing Arab governments to increase their engagement with Iraq.

15. (C) Felix-Paganon imagined that many players in Iraq and the region would keep their options open until after the U.S. elections, and he wondered how that would conflict with the USG's desire to leave a "cleaner scene" for the next administration. Based on FM Kouchner's recent visit to Iraq, he detected no sense of urgency among Iraqis on defining U.S./Iraqi relations given their preoccupation with security and the local political situation. Bilaterally, the French MFA continues to look at what it can do to improve French/Iraqi ties. Felix-Paganon said that the MFA would look first at how to use the newly opened embassy office in Irbil, which will eventually include a cultural center as well as a French economic/commercial officer among its staff. Security issues will continue to stymie any moves to set up a second office in either Basrah or Nasiriyah. Iraq's minister of defense will visit France soon to shop for weapons systems, which will necessitate a review of legal and administrative restrictions against such sales dating back to the Saddam era.

16. (C) On the European level, Felix-Paganon said that France, once it assumes the EU presidency in July, would recirculate a paper it had prepared with the UK and Sweden on measures the EU could take to strengthen its support for Iraq. Bigot noted that EU Higher Representative Solana and German FM Steinmeier were expected to visit Iraq, although neither had yet provided any confirmed dates. Felix-Paganon was hopeful for symbolic gestures from the EU in the near to medium term but doubted there would be much of substance

except as it has to do with Iraqi refugees. He explained part of this as purely budgetary, with the European Parliament, which sets budget priorities, not entirely convinced of the political priority of devoting funds to help Iraq. Welch, who called the Irbil office a good platform for increased French engagement in Iraq, stated that the Iraqis greatly appreciated Kouchner's recent visit and would similarly appreciate visits by Solana and Steinmeier.

17. (U) A/S Welch has cleared this cable.

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